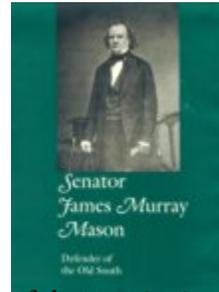


# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Robert W. Young. *Senator James Murray Mason: Defender of the Old South*. Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1998. xvii + 288 pp. \$38.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-87049-998-2.

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Robert W. Young examines the rise and fall of the Confederate States of America through the life of Senator James Murray Mason. Young investigates three critical themes that run through Mason's life—a strict interpretation of the Constitution, a defense of slavery, and foreign affairs—to reveal how this Virginia-born “cavalier” represented the heart of the Old South. Young also employs both a chronological and thematic approach to Mason's life and does an excellent job of weaving these together to place Mason in the heart of the issues that confronted his era.

James M. Mason was born on November 3, 1798. He attended the University of Pennsylvania and studied law at the College of William and Mary. In 1820, he began his law practice in Winchester, Virginia. His political career started in 1826 when he won the election to represent Frederick County in the Virginia House of Delegates. Mason, though, spent most of his early life devoted to family and to his law practice. Young reveals that these pursuits, however, became monotonous, leading Mason again to enter the political arena in 1847, winning election as a Virginia representative to the United States Senate.

As a politician, Mason clung to the doctrine of states' rights and a strict interpretation of the Constitution. Mason was influenced in the 1830s by the country's leading states' rights advocates such as John C. Calhoun and Virginia's Robert M. T. Hunter. Young claims that Mason's ideology was rooted in his heritage, his family, and in his education, and that he sought to preserve his idea of an older republic. Mason's political world view was a harkening back to the days of his forefathers, and he believed it unwise for Americans to relinquish their freedom to a strong central government. This backward-looking view

lent to Mason's strict interpretation of the constitution, that was evident as early as 1827 in the Giles resolutions and continued through the nullification crisis, the 1830s national bank crisis, and into his senatorial career. Furthermore, Mason opposed the formation of the Department of the Interior and government support of the Transcontinental Railway. Young also reveals that Mason's political ideology placed him in the mainstream of political opposition to the Van Buren administration. He opposed Van Buren's interference into the national economy through the formation of an independent treasury to deal with the panic of 1837, yet another sign of seeking to restore an older “order.”

On slavery, Young argues that Mason defended the “peculiar institution” on a constitutional basis as early as 1848. Mason suggested that northern failure to uphold the constitution and slavery eventually would lead to disunion. Nevertheless, a defense of slavery did not lead Mason to support Virginia secession from the Union. Rather, as Young argues, it was Mason's strict interpretation of the constitution and the northern assault on the constitution—the basis of southern honor and society—that led him to support disunion. Mason's constitutional defense of secession, however, is not as unique as Young leads the reader to believe. Jon L. Wakelyn reveals in his monograph *Southern Pamphlets on Secession* that the vast majority of southern politicians invoked constitutional arguments in support for secession and slavery. Though Mason believed secession irreversible, he continued to fight for peace. The author, however, does not make clear whether he wants the reader to regard Mason as a staunch secessionist or a conditional unionist. Furthermore, Young attempts to paint Mason as a man encompassing southern interests. This too is problematic because the complexity of that region made it impossi-

ble for one man to symbolize that world, whether of that era or an era gone by. For example, in the 1850s many southerners sought to expand the institution of slavery through filibustering attempts. Mason not only opposed this, but also further opposed Sam Houston's designs for a protectorate over Mexico. Thus, Mason appears to be more of a Virginian than a southerner. Nevertheless, through the thread of Mason's constitutional views and defense of slavery, Young does an excellent job of using the political life of this Virginian to show the crisis of American society and the struggle between nationalism and sectionalism.

By far, a large portion of the monograph is devoted to foreign affairs and Mason's tenure as Confederate Commissioner. Foreign-policy issues, Young claims, were just as significant in Mason's life and career as constitutional or slavery issues. Mason's venture into foreign affairs came in 1861 when Confederate President Jefferson Davis appointed Mason as Special Commissioner to Great Britain and Ireland. While Young paints Mason as a man devoted to heritage and family, reality shows quite a different picture. When Mason received his assignment to Europe, many friends urged Mason to take his family with him to London. Mason disregarded these suggestions, however, and instead left his family to the uncertainty of the crisis. In dealing with this part of Mason's life, Young exposes the complexity of international affairs that affected Europe's non-recognition of the Confederacy. In this context, Young is at his best in revealing the critical link between the military and political dimensions of the American Civil War. As long as the Union remained victorious on the battlefield, Mason's success in procuring diplomatic recognition from England was hindered. Nevertheless, Mason still had a mission to accomplish, and the reader is left to wonder whether Young views Mason as a successful diplomat. At one point, Young argues that Mason's social and political acquaintances are proof of his being "diplomatic" enough. In this light, the failure of diplomatic recognition lay not on Mason's shoulders but rest with forces outside of his influence, primarily with British political interests of the British Foreign Ministry. To be sure, Young reveals that the American Civil War did not play prominently in British foreign affairs. Instead, Great Britain was concerned with Italy, Poland, Denmark, Prussia, and Austria. On the other hand, however, Young uncovers a recurring pattern of passivity in Mason's diplomatic efforts to gain recognition. Mason failed to take charge in efforts toward gaining diplomatic recognition. Instead he waited on directions from Richmond or British advisors

and spent time engaged in social events and in financial and purchasing issues. Though Young does a noteworthy job of presenting foreign affairs and Mason simultaneously, one still has to wonder about the place of Mason in history and historical scholarship. Is this Virginian one of those forgotten southern leaders such as Louis T. Wigfall? Or was he another mere cog in the failed machinery of the Confederacy? In either case, Young adequately reveals the extent to which southerners relied too heavily upon cotton to influence foreign policy, and the failure of cotton in foreign diplomacy. Furthermore, Young also divulges how the Confederacy was driven to consider the unthinkable: acceptance of abolition in return for foreign recognition.

After the close of the war, Mason went into self-exile in Canada, finally gathering his family. He returned to Virginia in 1869 due to ill health. Until death, Mason remained unreconstructed, a testament, argues Young, to his desire for and commitment to an older republic.

Though Young has delivered a well researched and written biography, this reviewer does have some quibbles with the monograph. At times, the author appears to rely on older historical works, ignoring recent scholarship. For example, his understanding of the critical issues that affected and transformed political parties in the 1850s is based solely on the work of Eric Foner, ignoring the contributions of William Gienapp and Tyler Anbinder. Young also appears to view the American Civil War as an irrepressible conflict, an argument that clearly has been refuted. By viewing the American Civil War in this light, it allows the author to place Mason in the mainstream of the political struggle, instead of viewing him as a fringe politician who made little impact. It is clear that Mason was well known, but whether he was a great southern leader is debatable. Furthermore, like most of the old Civil War history, we gain the perspective of Virginians and the field is still left with trying to understand the complexity of the South. Of course, this is an admittedly unjust criticism given the topic of the book. Nevertheless, in the larger picture, the question is begged. After all, historical scholarship of the 1970s, emphasizing southern nationalism and a monolithic south, continues to influence scholarship, skewing our understanding of southern politics, the South, and the American Civil War. While such studies as Young's go far in shedding light on nineteenth-century political life, we still do not know enough about the era in a comparative sense. What did it mean to be a slaveholder, politician, or yeoman farmer from Texas versus one from Virginia or Florida? What did it mean to be a legislator

in the United States Congress as opposed to one in the state legislature—the locality of power and identification for nineteenth-century Americans?

Despite this criticism, Young's monograph makes a worthy contribution to the field for historians interested in Confederate foreign affairs and, more specifically, those interested in Mason's private life. More impor-

tantly, since Young views southern defeat as the product of failed attempts to gain official recognition, he exposes another side to the complexity of the failed Confederacy.

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